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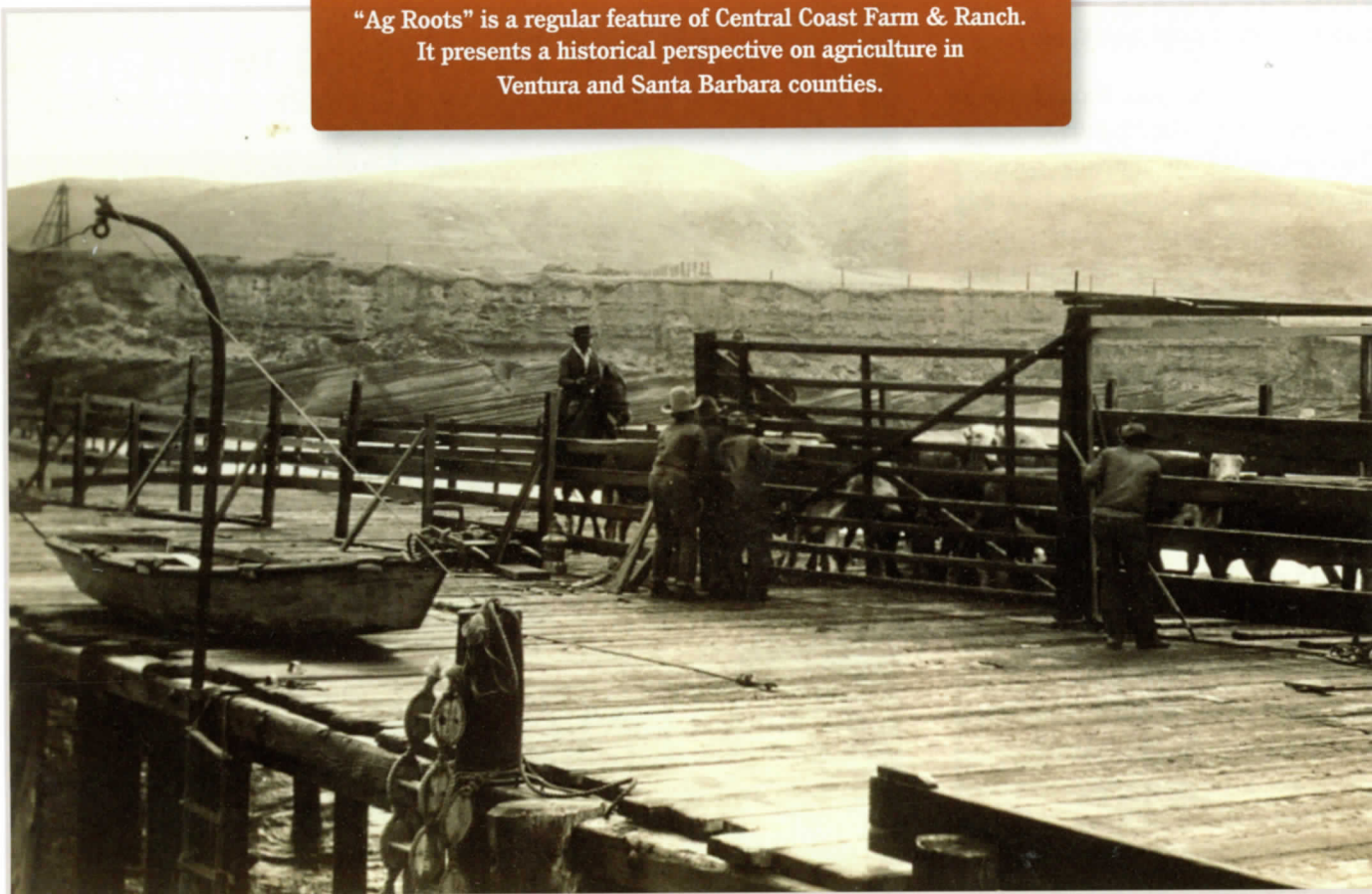
2390C Las Posas Rd # 506

Camarillo CA 93010-3403

PRINTED
U.S. POSTAGE
OXFORD, CA
PERMIT NO. 2020

Ag Roots

"Ag Roots" is a regular feature of Central Coast Farm & Ranch. It presents a historical perspective on agriculture in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.



Cattle from the Vickers & Vail Ranch are penned on the Santa Rosa Island pier in this 1928 photograph. PHOTO: CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK ARCHIVES

Island ranches underwent a sea change

BY CHERIE BRANT

The islands of Santa Cruz, Anacapa, Santa Rosa and San Miguel are today part of Channel Islands National Park, which beckons 30,000 visitors a year from the mainland to explore its sea caves and enjoy its pristine beaches. From the mid-1800s to the late 1980s, though, these islands off the Central Coast were home to isolated ranches where livestock vastly outnumbered the hardy human inhabitants.

In the mid-1850s, William Barron of San Francisco purchased Santa Cruz Island and transported almost 1,000 sheep from the mainland by schooner. To unload them, workers hog-tied the animals and ferried them in small boats to shore. Looking for an easier way, island manager Dr. Shaw built a eucalyptus pile wharf at Prisoners' Harbor in the early 1860s. It was the earliest work-

ing wharf in either Ventura or Santa Barbara counties.

Justinian Caire and nine business partners bought Santa Cruz Island in 1869. Caire later became the sole owner, and his family owned it until 1937. They raised cattle, sheep, horses, hay, vegetables and grapes and, under their efficient management, the island became almost self-sufficient.

Rugged terrain brought special challenges to livestock management on Santa Cruz. Between 40,000 and 50,000 sheep roamed the island. Most were Merinos, and their meat was said to have a particular flavor due to the salt-laden winds that seasoned the forage.

Clifford McElrath, stock superintendent from 1919 to 1921, described the excitement of a "corrida" or round-up in his book "On Santa Cruz Island."

A couple dozen vaqueros traveled over from the mainland. Starting before dawn, they fanned out across the island. The startled sheep headed for barrancas and hills, followed by hard-riding vaqueros armed with lariats and 6-foot bull whips.

On a good day the vaqueros corralled up to 1,000 sheep. On bad days, sheep jumped the 6-foot corral fence and others caused a pile-up as they tried to follow. Some hadn't been caught or sheared for six or seven years and could give up to 30 pounds of wool. The vaqueros did the shearing, and a strong man could clip 70 to 80 sheep a day.

Caire imported French grape vines in 1884, and the Main Ranch produced wine until Prohibition in 1920. Wild pigs enjoyed rooting among the vines, and hog patrol became a regular and dangerous task. A hunter often teamed

with a small mixed-breed dog, like the mongrel Tiempo, who was famous for holding a hog by the ear until it could be shot. Hunters received a bounty of two Toscano cigars for every hog snout they brought in.

At least Santa Cruz Island offers permanent sources of water. Anacapa Island has no dependable fresh water. Yet starting with Capt. George Nidever in the mid-1800s, a number of people raised sheep there. In the early 20th century, Ventura businessman H. Bay Webster, who lived on Anacapa with his wife and children, shipped 500 sheep from Santa Cruz Island. The animals survived by eating ice plant and other foliage to get moisture and sustenance.

Raising sheep on foggy, damp and windy San Miguel Island began in the 1850s. One rancher, Capt. Waters, lived there with his wife, Minnie, who complained the wind blew all the time. The Lester family took over ranching in 1930 but left after patriarch Herbert Lester committed suicide in 1942.

T. Wallace More and his brother A.P. grazed sheep on Santa Rosa Island beginning in 1844. During the Civil War wool commanded high prices. When the market collapsed after 1876, most of the sheep were killed, processed and sold as tallow.

In 1902 J. V. Vickers and W. L. Vail bought Santa Rosa Island. They operated Vail & Vickers as a cattle ranch until 1987 when the National Park Service took ownership.

Channel boats made the island ranching operations possible. The Santa Cruz, built in 1893, was a 64-foot-long motor schooner that provided a vital link between the islands and Santa Barbara. In the early days before wharfs and stock chutes were constructed, vaqueros pushed cattle off the boat and rounded them up as they swam to shore.

Today the National Park Service is working to restore the islands' natural vegetation and fauna. The sheep, cattle and horses departed years ago and the days of vaqueros rounding up the livestock are no more.

— Cherie Brant is a Ventura-based freelance writer and historian.

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